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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001597

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ALTERNATIVE SHI'A ADVOCATES NOT UNITED

REF: BEIRUT 1406

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Over the past few months a number of prominent Shi'a, including academics, journalists, and businessmen, have launched initiatives aiming to break what they believe is an Iran-funded Hizballah/Amal monopoly on Lebanese Shi'a political support. While these different Shi'a groups have held public events to announce agendas and goals, they do not appear to share much common ground other than anti-Hizballah sentiment. These activists insist they enjoy considerable support among Shi'a, but that people are simply afraid to speak out against Hizballah. On the other hand, they also admit their efforts may lack credibility among Shi'a because of financial support received from Saad Hariri's Future Movement. Personal and ideological differences between individuals also make efforts to establish an "alternative Shi'a" movement as a viable political force seem unrealistic to some, particularly those who question the usefulness of another religion-based party, and who disagree on how hard a rhetorical line should be taken against Hizballah. End summary.

HIZBALLAH CLAMPS DOWN ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

2. (C) On October 5 Poloff met with Lebanese University (LU, a government-funded institution) professor of social psychology Mona Fayad, a secular Shi'a who has participated in recent initiatives to organize Shi'a alternatives to the Hizballah/Amal hold. Fayad has attended initial meetings of Lebanese Choice (al-Khiyar al-Lubnani), a political party that receives modest funding from March 14. Another grouping, Lebanese Gathering for a Civil State (al-Liqa' al-Watani Intisaran li-Dawla al-Madaniyah) received considerable media coverage at its September 6 launch (in which Fayad participated), and plans to be an effective forum for voicing concerns that go beyond criticizing Hizballah.

3. (C) To illustrate just how risky it is to be perceived as criticizing Hizballah, Fayad described how she has found working at LU increasingly difficult because of the influence Hizballah wields over the LU administration. Fayad recounted that a research study she recently wrote on how deterioration of social conditions (lack of economic opportunity, overcrowding) can lead some youth to commit violent acts, such as suicide attacks, raised the hackles of Hizballah. Hizballah took offense at what they perceived to be criticism

of heroic acts of resistance and martyrdom. Fayad was reprimanded by LU's academic administration. Now she feels she is being monitored and is trying to transfer to another teaching position or perhaps give up teaching in Lebanon altogether.

INITIATIVES LACK COHESION, COMMON PURPOSE

14. (C) In reviewing the new Shi'a initiatives and some of their more prominent figures, Fayad described Lebanese Choice as close to Sunni leader Saad Hariri's Future Movement, and noted that that the Hariri link lessens its credibility in the view of many anti-Hizballah Shi'a. (Note: Shi'a MPs Bassem Saba and Ghazi Youssef are March 14 and Lebanese Choice members. Lawyer Mohamed Matar, another prominent Lebanese Choice member, is an advisor to Hariri. End note.) To demonstrate just how amorphous current attempts to counter Hizballah are, Fayad cited Ahmad Asad, leader of another Shi'a group called Belonging (Intimaa'), as a feudal leader who tries to be democratic, but cannot stomach the thought of being part of a group with common goals. As the scion of a prominent south Lebanon family, Asad believes he should be the leading figure in any Shi'a effort to counter Hizballah. Asad attended Lebanese Choice's first meeting, then dropped out and established his own group. Okab Saqr, journalist and Lebanese Choice founding member, gives the anti-Hizballah Shi'a movement "an intellectual aura." Saqr also advises Saad Hariri on Shi'a matters, and reflected Hariri's reluctance to support true moderates by stating at a September Lebanese Choice gathering that, "we are open to working with Hizballah and Amal."

15. (C) Fayad noted that a son of Sayyed Ali al-Amin, Mufti of

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Tyre, who has been marginalized for past outspoken criticism Hizballah and Amal (reftel) sent one of his sons to the Lebanese Gathering for a Civil State (Liqa') launch; Fayad believes al-Amin wholeheartedly supports the group. But even a well-known figure such as al-Amin keeps quiet in the current tense atmosphere. As Fayad put it, many grumble about Hizballah, but are frightened to be open about it. Furthermore, many anti-Hizballah Shi'a are embarrassed by Liqa's March 14 connections. In effect, they support March 14 values, but not necessarily its politicians.

DOES AN ALTERNATIVE TO HIZBALLAH HAVE TO BE RELIGION-BASED?

16. (C) Fayad herself believes it is impossible to compete with Hizballah as political party, and an alternative to Hizballah must be independent from any of the other established parties. Pointing out that although Hizballah leadership currently enjoys a clean reputation and has an impressive social service record, the social fabric in the Dahiyeh (Hizballah-controlled southern suburbs of Beirut) is deteriorating. Fayad claimed drug use is spreading, and the custom of muta' (temporary) marriage, which Fayad equated with prostitution, is spreading -- especially among Hizballah clerics. Fayad stressed that although people now shut up and put up for the sake of benefiting from Hizballah's social services, there will come a time when they will reject religion in politics.

FELTMAN